

The Invisibility of Migrant Women in Spain

Compared to long-standing migrant receiving societies like the United States and other parts of Europe, large-scale immigration to Spain--a country with a long tradition of emigration-- began relatively recently. Between the 1980s and the late 2000s, Spain experienced one of the largest waves of migration in European history, relative to its population. During this time, Spain went from being a sending country to a receiving country and developed into one of the world's most attractive migrant destinations due to its economic growth ahead of the global financial crisis. Spain's economic growth during the 1980s and 90s, its demand for low-wage workers, and its minimal border control and immigration restrictions in this era all helped to promote immigration. Today, Spain has one of the largest immigration trends in Europe.

Immigration to Spain has largely been composed of Europeans, Latin Americans, and Africans. The countries of origin of most migrants are Romania, Morocco, Ecuador and Colombia, followed by residents from the U.K, Italy, Bulgaria, and Bolivia. Immigrants have also recently come in smaller numbers from Asia, specifically Pakistan and China. According to the Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), the country received roughly 6 million new migrants from 1997 to 2009 and went from a total foreign population of 2% in 2000 to approximately 12% in 2011. This sudden and sharp increase in immigration significantly altered the makeup of the Spanish nation, creating the need for new migration policy. Like in other immigrant receiving societies, immigrants in Spain have faced stigmatization, xenophobia and racism. Often, immigrants are used as scapegoats and blamed for Spain's economic woes.

However, when considering the experiences of immigrants in Spain, we must acknowledge the unique challenges faced by migrant women. The majority of migrant women in Spain work in sectors such as domestic work, agricultural work and sex work because these types of jobs are seen as requiring perceived "feminine" qualities such as care, patience, submission, and self-sacrifice. Many of these jobs are low paid, unregulated and make women vulnerable to violence and abuse by employers. Another challenge migrant women face is sexual abuse and rape which often occurs on their journey from their home countries to Spain. Women and men often report migrating for different reasons. Many women migrate to flee gender-related violence, such as forced marriages or female genital mutilation. Other women migrate in search of a better education or work opportunities they may not have access to at home due to gender discrimination.

In Spain there are a range of challenges that migrant women confront as a result of facing multiple, overlapping oppressions: racism, sexism, xenophobia, and classism. These interlocking oppressions manifest themselves as negative social attitudes, institutional discrimination and a legal framework that fails to protect migrant women's rights. Additionally, migrant women are faced with the challenge of invisibility. Although migrant women are vital for Spain's quotidian operations, they lack representation and are made invisible to the public eye, allowing their oppression to go unnoticed and unchallenged. If attention is given to migration, it is usually placed on the male experiences, ignoring women's gender-related struggles. Until migrant women and their plight is represented fully and accurately in Spain, their oppression will continue.

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Information gathered from Jessica Sperling's "Spain: migration 1960s to present" in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration* in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration* (Blackwell Publishing, 2013); "Spain" International Organization for Migration (www.iom.int); "The Remarkable Case of Spanish Immigration" Bruegel (www.bruegel.org); "Migrant women's resilience in Spain" ActionAid International (www.actionaid.org); N. Michelle Murray's *Home Away from Home: Immigrant Narratives, Domesticity and Coloniality in Contemporary Spanish Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018) and Lucía Benavides' "As Spain's Immigration Rises, More Women Arrive With Experiences of Sex Abuse." in *NPR*, November 2, 2018.